The Bumblebee Flies Anyway Short Guide

The Bumblebee Flies Anyway by Robert Cormier

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Overview

The Bumblebee Flies Anyway treats a number of tensions central to the human condition: love and hate, selflessness and selfishness, optimism and pessimism, joy and suffering, victory and defeat, courage and fear, beauty and ugliness. Set in an experimental hospital for the dying, the novel portrays a group of teen-age boys preparing to die while hoping to contribute to the lives of others. Searching for meaning in life, the realistic characters speak their minds and reveal their emotions. Readers empathize with Mazzo's pain, Allie Roon's helplessness, Billy the Kid's loyalty, and Barney Snow's love, courage, and selflessness.

Despite the harsh realities of death and dying presented in this novel, Cormier adroitly weaves an optimistic story of the boys' efforts to make life not only bearable but worthwhile. This depiction of adolescents courageously facing pain, suffering, and imminent death is ultimately inspiring.

About the Author

Robert Cormier was born on January 17, 1925, in Leominster, Massachusetts, a small town where he has lived all his life. The second of eight children of Lucien Joseph and Irma Collins Cormier, he attended local schools before spending a year at Fitchburg Teachers College, later called Fitchburg State College. Years later, in 1977, Cormier received an honorary doctor of letters degree from that same college.

In 1946 Cormier began writing commercials for a local radio station in Worcester, Massachusetts, and from 1948 to 1955 he served as a reporter for the Worcester Telegram & Gazette. Beginning in 1955, Cormier became a reporter for the Fitchburg Sentinel, later known as the Fitchburg-Leominster Sentinel. He worked his way up to associate editor before resigning in 1978. Cormier's background in advertising and journalism served as an apprenticeship for his fiction writing; it also earned him a decent living with which he supported his wife Constance B. Senay, whom he married in 1948, and his four children.

Cormier's first three published novels were written for and about adults. Now and at the Hour (1960) depicts a man's last days as he fights cancer; A Little Raw on Monday Mornings (1963) portrays a thirty-eight-year-old widow who accidentally becomes pregnant and considers having an abortion; and Take Me Where the Good Times Are (1965) focuses on an elderly man not yet ready to be forgotten in an infirmary. Cormier likes to point out that these novels addressed major social issues that had not yet gained widespread public attention.

But it is Cormier's young adult novels that have been so highly acclaimed and widely read. Critic Tony Schwartz observes that if young adult fiction "has one best-selling heavyweight writer, an equivalent to Saul Bellow or William Styron, he is Robert Cormier."

The Chocolate War, I Am the Cheese, After the First Death, and The Bumblebee Flies Anyway have all appeared on the American Library Association's Best Book of the Year for Young Adults list.

Horn Book magazine presented the Fanfare Award to I Am the Cheese, and the MAXI Award for best paperback of 1975 went to The Chocolate War. The Bumblebee Flies Anyway was nominated for the Carnegie Medal, a British award.

According to Cormier, the ALAN Award (the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents Award of the National Council of Teachers) presented to him in 1982 is his crowning achievement because it recognizes the significance of his entire contribution to fiction for young adults.

Besides earning such accolades, Cormier's novels for young adults are very popular. The Chocolate War has sold thirty thousand hardback copies, and I Am the Cheese and After the First Death have sold 750,000 paperbacks each.

Setting

The Bumblebee Flies Anyway takes place in an experimental hospital for the dying, an unusual setting for a novel about teen-agers. The hospital's teenage patients are all there voluntarily, hoping, as Billy the Kid says, that "what they learned in the tests might help somebody, sometime." Most of the action occurs in Section 12, an isolated children's ward within the six-story red brick building. The neglected hospital grounds border a junkyard, "a wasteland of cars and trucks and vans and buses, a metal graveyard." From this "graveyard" Barney Snow resurrects a mock MG automobile and decides he can keep his promise to give Mazzo the one last car ride he yearns for.

Social Sensitivity

Some parents and teachers may object to Cormier's presentation of death and dying in a novel written for and about teen-agers. A fatalistic tone hovers over the action of the novel because all the boys in the hospital are doomed to die.

No specific illnesses are mentioned, but two characters—Ronson and Mazzo— actually die during the course of the novel, and all of the other patients, including Barney, will soon follow.

Despite the depressing setting and action, Cormier presents very optimistic underlying themes. Barney's quest to find meaning in life is a life-affirming theme, especially since he does discover that meaning. Barney's need to create his own identity presents a worthwhile model for younger and older readers alike. These powerful themes, subtly woven into the novel, should be pointed out to the younger reader, who might have difficulty separating these underlying themes from the novel's generally gloomy and depressing atmosphere.

Literary Qualities

The Bumblebee Flies Anyway is a gripping story that holds the reader's interest from beginning to end. The novel contains a richness of meaning partially realized through its use of symbols. One such symbol is the lilac bush. The "lilac bush heavy with clusters and fragrance" suggests Walt Whitman's famous poem on the death of Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865). Contrasted to a stark and lifeless tree nearby, the lilac bush here celebrates "the continuity of life," "the never-ending process of life," a sense of nature, a hint of God, man's hope for immortality. Just as the lilac bush, when it loses its blooms, does not die, so, too, Barney reflects, may be human life: "death only a sleep from which they eventually awakened."

The central symbol in the novel is its title, an allusion to the bumblebee, which is not supposed to fly because "its body is too heavy and it's the wrong shape." Yet the bumblebee, defying the laws of aerodynamics, flies anyway. In addition to flying, it also "manages to make a little honey every day." Like the little MG Barney finds in the junkyard, "it wasn't built to be driven," yet Barney and Mazzo drive it anyway. Ultimately, the bumblebee and the MG symbolize the lives of the boys, diseased bodies at death's door that are not supposed to think about living; yet the boys do. They even manage to find and share a little happiness among themselves.

In addition to the Whitman poem, the novel alludes to many other literary works. Cormier refers to Dylan Thomas's famous poem "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" (1952) when both Cassie and Barney are determined not to yield but to fight death. The description of the setting echoes T. S. Eliot's poem "The Wasteland" (1922).

There is also an allusion to Bernard Malamud's novel The Fixer (1966). Barney is called "the fixer"; indeed he is, both physically, in working on the Bumblebee, and morally, in creating himself as an ideal. Cassie uses Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice" (1923) to summarize the relationship between her father and mother. The end of the novel suggests poet John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819). Like the youths depicted on the urn "for ever piping songs for ever new," Barney, through the Bumblebee's flight, also experiences time frozen, the eternally happy moment.

Cormier makes interesting use of the relationship between twins. Events in Mazzo's life strangely induce effects on his twin sister Cassie. Cassie experiences whatever pain her mirror image, Mazzo, suffers, a phenomenon she calls "the Thing." It reminds her of a movie she has seen, The Corsican Brothers, "in which twin brothers had shared each other's wounds and injuries." Cassie's mention of the stigmata refers to the religious belief that the five wounds of the crucified Christ appear on the bodies of those who have imitated most fully his life and have become, therefore, his spiritual twins.

One other literary technique found in the novel deserves particular attention.

Suggestive of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), Cormier creates a form of "doublespeak," whereby characters use words and phrases in such a way that they do

not have clearcut meanings. By using ambiguous words when describing their situation, the boys make their plight seem more bearable. For instance, Barney calls the large hospital "the Complex." Dr. Lakendorp becomes "the handyman"; medicine, "the merchandise"; reactions to the medicines, "aftermaths"; and all the medical paraphernalia, "doodads." "The Machine" refers to the large computer that asks Barney only objective, yes or no questions. Even death has its euphemism; Barney calls it "The Ice Age."

Others in the novel use doublespeak as well. Cassie refers to the novitiate (a house set up for those who want to become nuns, which Cassie visits) as the "hacienda," and her twin experience of Mazzo's pain and suffering she calls "the Thing." Dr. Lakendorp uses the word "screen" to refer to the obliteration of memory with a chemical compound.

Medical experiments he calls "proceedings" and pain becomes "discomfort."

When tying down Barney's arms and legs to keep him from moving, Dr.

Lakendorp uses the words "secured" and "stationary." He even refers to the remission of Barney's terminal disease as a "delicate balance."

It is this marvelous use of language that makes The Bumblebee Flies Anyway more than just another novel about teen-age boys. The wealth of its allusions, the suggestiveness of its symbols, and its creative use of doublespeak render the novel stimulating and provocative for young adult and adult readers alike.

Themes and Characters

The narrative opens in the hospital ward where the main characters live.

The action begins to rise when Barney Snow, the protagonist, finds a balsa wood replica of an MG in the junkyard.

Barney later decides that the last ride he has promised Mazzo will take place in the imitation MG. The action then moves rapidly to the climax, which occurs when Mazzo, Barney, and Billy get the MG up to the roof of the hospital.

There, as Mazzo lies dying, they wheel the Bumblebee off the roof; no need for them to ride it—"they didn't need to fly.

The Bumblebee would fly for them."

Time stands still; space is frozen. For Barney "the Bumblebee never stopped flying." It is the enduring culmination of their effort to extract victory from defeat, optimism from despair, joy from sorrow, love and loyalty from isolation and separation. Even as the story closes and Barney lies blinking, fighting to overcome the pain that overwhelms his body, he triumphantly remembers this victory.

A subplot to this main narrative is the relationship between Barney and Cassie Mazzofono, Mazzo's twin sister. When Cassie comes to the hospital to visit her brother, Barney is immediately attracted to this beautiful blonde girl. He cements his relation to her by agreeing to give her precise reports on her brother's health. Out of love for her, he checks on Mazzo constantly and seeks medical reports from nurses. Cassie becomes even more aware of Barney's goodness when she discovers that he has rebuilt the MG for her brother. With that revelation, Cassie kisses Barney, in "the one great moment of his life."

The experimental hospital's "terminal patients" include Ronson, a former Golden Gloves champion; Allie Roon, spasmodic and stammering; Billy the Kidney, confined to a wheelchair; bedridden Alberto Mazzofono (Mazzo), once rich and handsome but now wasting away and dying; and Barney J. Snow, who, for much of the novel, does not think he is terminally ill. Nurse Bascam, herself terminally ill, oversees these patients, and Doctors Croft and Lakendorp treat the young patients.

Conflicts abound in this story. The primary external conflicts are between man and nature—the teen-agers' fight against the diseases that ravage their bodies and Barney's defying the law of gravity in getting the Bumblebee (the MG) out of the junkyard all the way up to the roof of the hospital. All the terminal patients constantly experience the internal conflict of whether to combat their pain or to give up, to do something with their lives or to do nothing. Barney gives witness to this struggle when he says, "I'm not resigned the way the Handyman says everybody here is resigned. Not willing to accept it all without struggling, fighting."

The Bumblebee Flies Anyway shows that death has no favorites. Nature's golden boys —Mazzo and Ronson—are too soon death's victims. And the darling of the novel, Barney J. Snow himself, comes to realize that he too is dying.

Given the certainty of his death, Barney wonders who he really is. As the story progresses, Barney undertakes a quest to find meaning in life. He sees himself as having "a mission to carry out." His middle initial "J" stands for Jason, and like the mythical Jason, Barney Jason Snow wants to find the golden fleece, the "stuff" that would make his life worthwhile.

Barney subsequently defines himself in terms of his love for Cassie, his friendship with Billy the Kid, and his loyalty to Mazzo. In brief, he creates his own essence with qualities that most people would characterize as most noble, most important, and most enduring. Barney makes himself into a model human being, one whom most people would admire. The Bumblebee, then, really stands for Barney's affirmation of life —"untouchable and unspeakably beautiful."

Cormier also explores a more subtle theme—the questionable ethics of medical experimentation. Dr. Lakendorp examines his patients with cold green eyes, always wearing his green uniform, his face blank, his look remote. To him, patients are only objects of scientific interest. "I do not question their motives," he says, "I cannot deal in imponderables. I deal in results, effects. . . .I do not question, do not go beyond that."

And Dr. Croft, although jokingly called The Lone Ranger, appears sinister: "a tall thin man, face hidden by the surgical mask. Except for his eyes, which were gray and flat and expressionless."

Although the boys agree to sacrifice themselves, hoping that the medical experiments will help others, Cormier raises questions about the ethics of such medical practices. For instance, in administering Barney's screen—a chemical compound designed to prevent him from remembering that he is dying—the medical researchers have erased too much; Barney cannot remember his family, cannot remember his childhood, cannot even remember his prayers. Thus, modern science has seemingly replaced religion in a person's life. As Barney says: "Tempo, rhythm.

That was his religion now, the religion that had been created for him in the tests. Instead of a prayer, tempo, rhythm. He looked at the Handyman, shook his head. 'No, I don't need a priest.'"

Topics for Discussion

1. Using the text, describe the supporting cast of characters living in the Complex, including Ronson, Billy the Kidney, Mazzo, and Allie Roon.

2. Discuss the role of the medical personnel in the novel, including Nurse Bascam, Dr. Lakendorp, and Dr. Croft.

3. Discuss Cassandra Mazzofono's role in the novel and show how she is a major character in the subplot of the story.

4. Cormier has often been praised for his writing style. Using examples from the text, describe several features of that style.

5. Crisis may be defined as a turning point of a story, usually based on the protagonist's decisions. Identify several such decisions made by Barney and show how they bring about turning points in the plot.

6. Trace the physical movement of the Bumblebee from the point Barney first discovers it to when it is rolled off the roof of the Complex. In what ways is this movement central to the novel?

7. Some critics claim that although Cassie's role as a "love idol" is convincing, her role as her twin brother's "empathetic alter ego" is not. Cite evidence from the text to support your agreement or disagreement.

8. The role of religion is obviously important to Cassie. Describe that importance as it is literally and symbolically presented in the novel.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Discuss the use of "doublespeak" in the novel. Is it effective? What is its overall significance and role in the novel?

2. Doctors are portrayed as cold and impersonal in the novel. Are they just being scientific or are they really evil?

3. Describe the setting. Compare and contrast it with T. S. Eliot's poem "The Wasteland."

4. There are several important symbols in the novel, such as the lilac bush, the stigmata, and the bumblebee. Trace one of them in detail as it appears in the novel and discuss its suggested meanings.

5. The plot has elements of both pessimism and optimism. Which element, in your view, is dominant? Support your choice.

6. Choose a central conflict in the novel, such as optimism versus pessimism or altruism versus selfishness, and classify and describe several of the characters in terms of that choice.

7. One critic calls the issue of experimental medicine a "red herring" in the novel. Do you agree?

8. Discuss at length the phenomenon of twin experience in the novel. Connect its use with real-life examples gleaned from research.

9. The novel makes many allusions to works of literature. Read a work to which it alludes and report on the work itself and on Cormier's use of it in the novel.

10. One critic claims that Cormier is a Christian writer. Use the text to prove or disprove this theory.

For Further Reference

Bagnall, Norma. "Realism: How Realistic Is It? A Look at The Chocolate War."

Top of the News 36 (Winter 1980): 283-285. In this book review, Bagnall criticizes Cormier's first young adult novel for its lack of realism.

Campbell, Patricia. Presenting Robert Cormier. Boston: Twayne, 1985. In this popular yet critical treatment, Campbell provides the only booklength criticism of Cormier's fiction.

Carter, Betty, and Karen Harris.

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This article furnishes a rebuttal to Norma Bagnall's earlier review.

Ellis, W. Geiger. "Cormier and the Pessimistic View." Alan Review 12 (Winter 1985): 10-12, 52-53. This discussion of Cormier's seeming pessimism appears in an entire issue focusing on Robert Cormier and his writings.

Janeczko, Paul. "An Interview with Robert Cormier." English Journal 66 (September 1977): 10-11. Discusses Cormier's career as a journalist and as a writer of fiction.

Schwartz, Tony. "Teen-Agers' Laureate."

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Silvey, Anita. "An Interview with Robert Cormier." Horn Book 61 (March-April 1985): 145-155; and (May-June 1985): 289-296. This two-part interview focuses on Cormier's Beyond the Chocolate War, his methods of writing, and influences on his work.

Wess, Robert C. "Robert Cormier." In Popular World Fiction: 1900 to Present, edited by Walton Beacham and Suzanne Niemeyer. Vol. 1. Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1987. This essay analyzes The Chocolate War, I Am the Cheese, and After the First Death from a number of critical perspectives.

Wess, Robert C., and Claire Stewart.

"Robert Cormier, The Man and the Writer." Georgia English Counselor 21 (Spring 1984): 4-7. This interview offers an interpretive understanding of Robert Cormier the person and writer.

"The Underlying Vision in Robert Cormier's The Chocolate War." Advocate 4 (Fall 1984): 26-36. Using Cormier's comments about his interest in "another layer of meaning" in his

fiction, the authors offer an in-depth study of Cormier's three young adult novels of the 1970s.

Related Titles

The Bumblebee Flies Anyway is the fourth of six novels for young adults written by Robert Cormier. The latest novel, entitled Fade, explores the absence of an uncle from a family portrait.

Dealing with three generations of a single family, the novel reflects Cormier's abiding interest in family life.

All five novels before Fade occur in or around institutions: Trinity High School in The Chocolate War and its sequel Beyond the Chocolate War, a mental institution in I Am the Cheese, a military complex in After the First Death, and an experimental hospital for the terminally ill in The Bumblebee Flies Anyway.

In addition to the institutional settings, these five novels all involve a teenage protagonist trying to make sense out of life in an environment that is either negative or downright hostile. Each novel also explores variations on the theme of betrayal. Although some of these betrayals are self-betrayals, they more often involve betrayals by others, particularly adults. In these betrayals, Cormier suggests a moral lesson: beware of the other guy, and especially beware of institutions and adults; they all may be out to get you.

One common theme running through Cormier's novels for young adults is the adolescent's need to transcend the mean circumstances of life. Jerry Renault in The Chocolate War, for instance, forswears an allegiance to the Vigils and follows his own inner lights. Although isolated in a mental institution, Adam Farmer of I Am the Cheese fantasizes that he is riding his bike to visit his father, who is in fact dead. Kate Forrester, the tragic heroine in After the First Death, willingly sacrifices herself for the welfare of the children, and Ben Marchand does so out of love for his father. Barney Snow, in sending the Bumblebee off the roof of the Complex, transcends time, space, and motion.

Finally, in Beyond the Chocolate War, Jerry Renault refuses to fight Emile Janza, overcoming Janza's brute strength through passive resistance.

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